

Sharing the Message “with Courtesy and Respect” (1 Peter 3:15)

Working with Colleagues from Other Faith Traditions: Some Observations from Scripture Translation Projects

by *Tim James*

Usually, in the task of translating Biblical texts, working alongside people from other faith backgrounds is seen as being something of a last resort, something that is done when there are no other options. There is a sense of distrust, of fear, of preferring to rely on those regarded as insiders to the Christian faith. However, it may be that the advantages of working with those of other faiths outweigh the disadvantages. In this paper I would like to suggest that, in the translation of the Scriptures for a mainly non-Christian audience, sympathetic people of other faiths may be the most important asset for that programme.

My own experience has been in working with Muslim colleagues in Scripture translation since 1986. The recent part of that has been in relating to a mainly Muslim team of translators and literacy workers. I have not found any occasion in which these colleagues have been less than honourable, diligent, open and fair minded. That is not to say that Muslims in general, nor my colleagues in particular, are perfect, but only that in 20 years I have had no cause for complaint, mistrust or concern because of their being Muslims, and their work and commitment to the Scripture translation projects has been exemplary. They have gone the second mile in their friendship and service to the projects.

In this paper I will look at a few Scripture translation projects in which Muslims have been involved as colleagues. I will also try and draw out some principles and make some observations on this kind of partnership, especially in terms of the key dynamics of communication, ownership, learning and relationships. These lessons are applicable not only to Bible translators, but to all Christian workers seeking to work with Muslim people groups.

Case Studies

Case A is of an expatriate linguist/exegete advisor who has been involved in translation projects in two Muslim languages. In one language he worked with a number of students at a university. In another he worked with a person with qualifications in English Literature and Islamic Studies. All of these people

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were Muslims, with a variety of religiosity. The expatriate advisor made some caveats about working with these colleagues:

In some cases they may suggest translating things in a way that removes or effaces unpleasant facts/doctrines in the text.

It can be more stressful for the linguist/exegete, as it pushes you beyond your comfort zone. In the area of exegesis it can be challenging since you walk a tightrope of being relevant to the culture, yet needing to be faithful to the text.

In terms of security issues it can be more tense working with people where there is not the “trust factor” of a shared faith.

Having given those caveats, the advisor strongly emphasized the positive aspects of working with Muslim translators:

The best thing about working with them is that they represent our audience. We are producing materials for people with no church background whatsoever, and these people give us representative feedback from the audience worldview and perspective. They also help us to develop empathy for and understanding of our audience.

They are very helpful on attitude and affective issues. They have been honest about when something is offensive, shocking, “illogical,” or particularly impressive to them.

They are good at giving us an “outsider perspective”. Believers tend to read into the passage what they have been told it means, and no longer see the unnaturalness or strangeness in certain wordings. They also help us see things that don’t “make sense” in more literal translations, often a matter of missing implicit information, collocational clashes, etc.

Exegetically there are times when how you understand a verse is a matter of worldview, and we can translate the text from a different, yet perfectly valid angle.

They are usually not afraid to tell us when they disagree with some idea or phrasing, and also usually express their appreciation for ideas that are attractive or surprising (in contrast to what they had been told Christians believe).

They also bring authenticity and naturalness of expression. They have not been affected by Christian traditions of language and translation.

Finally, the advisor comments on his overall assessment of the helpfulness of having Muslims included in such translation projects:

I think that it is essential to have substantial Muslim input in any project where the percentage of Muslim speakers is high and the desire is to use the translation to reach out to them. I recognize in some cases you have a translation that is only meant for the church, but even in such a case, it is not healthy for the church to



be introverted and to develop a “linguistic ghetto”. It will only benefit the project to have Muslim involvement.

My impression from looking at the existing translations in our area is that it is likely that none of them had significant Muslim input, or if there was input, it was not taken seriously and incorporated into changes in the text. Over and over we find that all the traditional translations use wording that is unnecessarily vague, offensive, or meaningless.

The advantage of asking Muslims in positions of cultural/educational leadership to be involved is that it creates goodwill and even leads them to feel “ownership” of the text in some way. They also tend to communicate with their friends about what they are doing, leading to curiosity among others and openness to the message.

Case B concerns a translation project that was initiated by a number of scholars in a Muslim language. The scholars—some leading experts on their language—were all Muslim. Although

there is finance for the project from church sources, the impetus, direction and work on the project belong to these Muslim scholars.

In their opinion, because their language is a major language of some importance, it deserves to have major works of literature like the Bible translated into it. The existing translations in nearby languages are fairly understandable, but there is a desire to have the same literature in the mother-tongue as a matter of honour and equality.

The scholars are producing the translation as a scholarly work, with good literary style, which academics could read without feeling that the book was beneath them. They aim to supplement the translation with extensive maps and notes, and even a facing page of ‘protestant’ commentary.

Case C is the project I myself have been involved in. For thirteen years this has involved working both with Muslim colleagues, and with MBBs (people from a Muslim background with a faith in Christ) in a situation where we were involved in Scripture translation and educational development together. For the past seven years the situation has changed to one in which I serve as advisor to a project owned and run by Muslim and MBB colleagues. In both situations there was good acceptance by the Muslims of the personal faith of the MBBs, and complete ease on the part of the MBBs towards their Muslim colleagues.

This situation did not occur by accident, since the team has been careful to work with people who are understanding and open-minded. There are Muslims who are not happy with this kind of work, but there are also many who are happy with it. As with any society, the community I have been involved in is heterogeneous. One cannot make generalisations about all people in the society. But, in my experience, there are many people in Muslim societies who are interested, sympathetic and open-minded towards Scripture translation, as well as those who are not.

My own experience of my Muslim colleagues is that they respect the exegetical input of those they see as being knowledgeable about the Biblical texts and Biblical languages. This was true even when issues were clearly difficult for them. Over the literal translation of *huios theou* (usually rendered in English as ‘Son of God’), they were content to go along with that if a literal rendering of such metaphors was the policy that had been decided. On the other hand, when the decision was made to try a functional translation of the term, one colleague simply commented “now isn’t that beautiful?”

In terms of relationships with the broader community, it was a Muslim colleague who did all of the promotion of the translation. Many would come to him with questions about the translation, and he would stay up late into the night explaining to them that it was the duty of Muslims to read the Injil. He also was the one who smoothed ruffled feathers within the community when some were concerned about the effects of Scriptures in their language. And he was the one who made sure that all of the social and practical arrangements were in place for the continuation of the translation and its publication and distribution. He was very attentive in anticipating how the translation would be received in his community and making sure that there were no problems with its reception, and that there would be many interested and sympathetic readers. This he did successfully until, because of local jealousies, some in the community started propaganda against him. Since then he has suffered greatly for his involvement in the project. Nevertheless, he has stayed faithful to the project, continuing to help and to be fiercely protective of the project and those involved, both local and expatriate.

While most colleagues, whether Christian, MBB or Muslim, are concerned to receive a decent living wage for their work in translation, as is their right, this one Muslim colleague worked on the translation for 12 years refusing any pay. Since then he did

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accept employment for the educational development he was involved in for five years, but has now left that employment and once again is giving his time and support voluntarily. His unworldliness, integrity, faithfulness, sympathy and open-mindedness have been an example I have rarely seen paralleled in Christians or others.

With regard to the broader aspects of the project, the most vital thing for it is the complex and delicate process of negotiation with the wider Muslim community. For this the most important asset has been those Muslim colleagues and well-wishers from within the community who have been able to represent the project in a positive light, and make use of their social networks to gain acceptance for it.

Communication

As has been noted above, one of the practical advantages of having Muslims involved in a translation programme designed to communicate to a mainly Muslim audience, is that they are aware of the contextual gaps in understanding that need to be bridged for the audience to understand the text. For MBBs, even those who have only recently come to faith in Christ, there is frequently a massive shift towards adopting Christian terminology, ways of speaking and practices. Some friends from another Muslim language community have commented that a Christian only has to open their mouth for everyone to know that they are Christian.

Some fear that Muslims will skew the translation towards their own Islamic understanding of theology and of prophetic history. However, this is not the case where the exegesis for the translation is adequately done. I have not met Muslims in my own work, who have wanted to change the translation deliberately to something they knew was exegetically inaccurate. On the contrary, I have only seen a great reverence for the text and deep

concern that the translation should be as accurate as possible. In addition, as much as there may be unconscious skewing of a translation towards Islamic thought by Muslim translators, there appears to be even greater risk of skewing by Christian translators who import Christian traditional understanding into the translation.

There will inevitably be differences in theology between Islam and Christianity. However, my own experience is that such theological points of divergence as the crucifixion and the deity of Christ are not nearly as problematic for many Muslim readers in approaching the Biblical texts as the use of inappropriate language, and forms of narrative that are alien to the community. The key factor is that the narrative of the text should be translated in a way that is dignified by forms that are appropriate in the community for religious narrative, and uses terminology that is respectful towards prophets and others in the texts.

A recent example of this was when a Muslim man gave books to two religious leaders in his community. To one he gave a copy of the Bible, published with a black cover, literally translated, and using many traditional and ecclesiastical turns of phrase. To the other he gave a copy of the life of Christ, translated as a narrative in the Muslim religious literary tradition, yet without compromising on the events and teaching of the gospels. The man who had received the black Bible said that it was a horrible book, full of disgraceful things. But the man who was given the life of Christ said it was a beautiful book, and people should be reading that sort of thing.

Western cultures, which tend to be analytical, individual and decontextualised, often focus on the propositional *content* of what is said. Whereas for other cultures, which can be more holistic, communal and contextualised, the way things are said

may be equally important, especially where this carries implications about the relationships between speaker and hearer; or in our case, between authors, translators, promoters and hearers/readers. Muslim colleagues, intuitively aware of the intricacies of appropriate language in religious discourse, bring vital knowledge, skills and wisdom to the task of translation.

Ownership

If one asks a Muslim what he or she believes, one is likely to receive the reply “we believe ...”. It can be very difficult to persuade them to answer in terms of “I believe ...”. This is not because they have abdicated the responsibility to think any more than we have. It is because for many Muslims, as for those of many other societies, their identity is not a solely individual matter, but a matter of the community they belong to. For Westerners identity often is a matter of what work they do, what they have achieved, and the choices they have made as individuals. For many non-Westerners, identity is a matter of their sense of belonging to family, clan, nation and religion. If you ask a Westerner “who are you?”, you will probably receive a reply beginning with “I’m Joe Bloggs...”, whereas in parts of South Asia you might get the reply “I’m a Punjabi...”, or “I’m a Pathan...”.

In *Beyond Culture* (1976:85-116) anthropologist Edward T. Hall classifies cultures as *high-context* or *low-context*. High-context cultures are relationship-oriented, people know each other and already share and make use of a great deal of common context. Low-context cultures, on the other hand, tend to be rule-oriented, people are seen as being individuals, and there is much less shared context. In terms of communication, high-context cultures pay great attention to information that is implied rather than stated. Correspondingly they make less information explicit when they talk, and they expect their listeners to know the context for communication that will supply the information they left unstated. Low-context cultures, generally ‘western’

ones, tend to want things to be explicit and context-independent. They don’t expect to need, comparatively speaking, a great deal of shared context in order to communicate. In addition, for low-context cultures getting or giving information may be seen as the goal of many communication exchanges, whereas for high-context cultures the overriding goal of the communication exchange is maintaining social harmony.

Many Muslim cultures could be classed as *high-context*, and thus the overriding issue of communication in



these cultures would be the negotiation of relationships. This is certainly true of the translation of Biblical texts. Whereas the Westerner involved in this process may be mainly concerned to ensure that the translation is accurate in some sense or other, the Muslim translator, in addition to concerns for accuracy, will also desire the translation to give the right social signals. The key issue here is one of *ownership*—who does the language community see the translation as belonging to. Readers or hearers belonging to *high-context* societies will be alert to signals of ownership in the translation and terminology, or in its presentation, or in the publishers, or in the translation team and its processes, or in those who promote and distribute it. If it is seen as being something from outsiders, with an agenda seen as potentially detrimental to the cohesion of the community, then it may be treated with suspicion or even hostility. On the other hand, if the translation

is seen as representing something produced and endorsed by the community itself, especially by those who are leaders in the community, then it may be seen as something that actually enhances community cohesion.

Ownership, or belongingness, functions at a number of levels. The involvement of members of the community in the process of producing the translation is an important signal of community ownership. If the translation is for a Muslim people, then the involvement of those who are seen as still an integral part of the community—which is likely to mean those who are seen as Muslims—will communicate the legitimacy of the project.

In one translation project in Central Asia as the translation was in progress the translators approached Muslim leaders in the language community for their input to the project. The religious leaders said that the translation should be published not only in Cyrillic script, but in Arabic script as well. The translators took their advice. The result of this was that in some sense those religious leaders are part of the project. By giving their advice, and by its being accepted, they have implicitly accepted the translation at some level. In addition, the process of consulting them was a gesture of respect for them and their position in the community.

In a *high-context* society—one that is concerned about relationships more than the communication of bare facts—*who* it is that says something can be as important as *what* they say. In one Muslim language community a well known imam preached in his mosque sermon on the caring and forgiving nature of God. He said,

Allah is the Creator who produced you, and it is not that He just produced you and left you, produced you and now doesn’t ask after you as some uncaring fathers do who get married, produce children, but don’t care about their child whether the child is feeding or not, is ill or well, or where they are.

In this part of his sermon, and elsewhere in the sermon, the preacher contrasts God with human fathers.

When I asked a Muslim friend what the most important thing in life for him was, he said, for many people to come to my funeral.

That may not normally be seen as legitimate in Islamic theology, but because the speaker is a respected imam preaching a mosque sermon, he has the liberty to make these comparisons without the risk of being misunderstood. That is not the case with outsiders. Because they are outsiders often what they say will be treated with some suspicion.

The same is the case with regard to publication of translations in a Muslim context. If they are published by Muslim publishers (or non-sectarian local publishers), or endorsed by Muslim leaders, then they will be likely to find better acceptance than if they are published by outsiders. (Of course, there are many societies in which parts of the society concerned are disenchanted with their community for one reason or another. In that case, publication by outsiders may not be seen as a bad thing by those who are disenchanted, although that is likely to only be a partial disenchantment.)

In this way, if the team and the project are seen as belonging to the community, then the translation they produce is more likely to be seen as belonging to the community, too. This is another reason why it is helpful for Muslims to be involved in the translation of the Scriptures into languages belonging to Muslim communities.

Learning

In her book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, the educationist Jane Vella emphasises the importance of *listening* as a vital part of teaching. The same principle goes for Christians involved in translation projects in Muslim communities. They should be aware that, just as Muslim translators have much to learn about the Biblical texts, so also a Christian translator does not know all the answers, either with regard to the host language and culture, or with regard to the exegesis of the Biblical texts. The process is

not a *unidirectional* one of Christians explaining and teaching what God's Word says, but a process of learning for all concerned. If everyone in the process is Christian, then there will be a significant gap in that learning process. If Christians want to communicate with Muslims, then they need to learn from Muslims.

This opens the door to a fruitful process of Muslims and Christians learning together from the Biblical texts. Many Muslim cultures are closer to most of the Biblical cultures than are most highly individualistic and *low-context* western cultures. Especially because of the *communal* nature of *high-context* cultures, there are a number of important Biblical themes that Westerners find difficult to appreciate. These include such things as the people of God, covenant, faithfulness, excommunication, ritual purity and religious law. By listening to Muslim colleagues, and by learning from their cultures, the Westerner may be able to learn things about how God related to Biblical cultures that he or she would not have fully appreciated from a more individualistic *low-context* perspective.

For a Christian involved in Scripture translation in a language not their own, it may be helpful to see their role not only in terms of *mission*—a *going* to tell the good news—but also in terms of *pilgrimage*—a *going* to pay respect to something sacred, to learn, and to grow in faith. There is something sacred about the culture, language and heritage of another people, and there is a great deal to learn, not just technically (e.g., how to speak, act, dress appropriately) but things that touch faith, such as what it means to be human, what goodness consists of, and how human societies are the means by which God has revealed himself and through which He speaks. One's faith does not stay the same from the day one

first believed, and identifying with, and learning from, people from other cultures is a powerful means of grace in the journey of faith.

But another dynamic of mutual learning in relating to Muslim colleagues is that it is one way of showing respect. If it is implied by my words and actions that my relationship with Muslim colleagues is *unidirectional*, that they must learn from me, and I have nothing to learn from them, then, along with my intended message of the gospel, I will accidentally be sharing another message; of arrogance and disdain for all that my colleagues know and are.

Relationships

In one South Asian Muslim language there is a proverb that "a coward will die for bread, but a true man will die for his name". This means that for someone who is really honourable there is nothing more important than their honour. It was observed above that in *high-context* cultures people's identity is centred on who they are, rather than what they do, on their belonging to a community rather than their achievements and particularities as an individual. This is why, when I asked a Muslim friend what the most important thing in life for him was, he said, 'for many people to come to my funeral'. Apart from that being an assurance of the prayers of many people, it is especially a sign that he would have been seen as a good member of the community, someone respected and honoured. It is hard for outsiders from individualistic cultures to quite appreciate such a relationship-oriented life.

But this ethic, of being honourable within one's community, is of huge importance to many Muslim societies. Thus, the hallmark of any translation project in a Muslim language must be obvious, genuine respect for the Muslim translators, the host language, the host culture and the members of the host community. It is not, as happens in western *low-context* cultures, a case of a translation being done and becoming available

in a language in some impersonal way. A translation in a *high-context* society, in every part of the process, represents a set of relationships, and those relationships should be showing respect.

It is worth noting that, as a generalisation, while *low-context* cultures focus on the meaning of a discourse in a comparatively abstract way, *high-context* cultures focus more on the *implicit* relational messages in and surrounding the discourse. People from relational cultures are very good at “reading” other people, and will pay a great deal of attention to perceived messages of respect, disrespect, friendship and hostility.

If a translation is done in which the key terms and names are foreign, the style of language is foreign (or maybe just inappropriate for sacred narrative), the advice of mother-tongue translators is consistently overridden by outsiders, the format of the translation does not reflect the customs of the community, and the community as a whole and its leaders have been neglected in the process, then the translation will be saying in many implicit ways that there is little of worth in the host community, its people, language and heritage, and that all good things come from outside. A perception that this is the case will be felt as something insulting, humiliating and perhaps threatening.

An important part of showing respect and good relationships is *listening*. It has been observed above how important listening and learning are for work across cultures, and for good translation practice. But a key aspect of listening touched on above, but needing emphasising again, is that attentive listening is a strongly relational activity. It says that you consider the other person worth listening to, that you value their views and that you count their culture and experiences as important. Jomier (1989:134) says:

There are many real values by which Muslim peoples live which Christians risk failing to see. Like any religion, Islam signifies not only a type of relationship between human beings and God but also a whole collection of human attitudes which are

preserved and protected by Muslim society. And as long as Muslims do not encounter real sympathy for their authentic values among Christians, they will feel an instinctive repulsion from those who do not understand them. The word of a wise man from Mali, Hampate Ba, still holds: if your brother does not understand you, it is because you do not understand him. When you have understood him, he will understand you.

Mahatma Gandhi observed, when addressing a group of missionaries in India,

I speak to you what I feel from the bottom of my heart. I miss recep-



tiveness, humility and willingness on your part to identify yourself with the masses of India.

It can be a difficult lesson for Western Christians to learn, that people are more important than work. However fine, however accurate, a translation may be, even if it is technically perfect in every regard, if the translation and how it was produced do not communicate honour of the people in the community involved in translating it, in sponsoring and promoting it, and of their culture, language and community, then it is a poor reflection of the love of Christ.

Conclusion

In translation projects for Muslim audiences, Muslim translators are a blessing. They are a blessing both to the project and also to any outsiders involved in the project. In a very real sense the Scriptures belong to Muslims as well as to Christians.

A vast number of Muslims are eager to read or hear what is in the *Taurat*,

the *Zabur*, the writings of the prophets and the *Injil*. If they can see that these Scriptures, and the process of translation and promotion that has made them available to them, pay respect to them and their community, and that these Scriptures belong to their community, then I believe they will be widely read and thought about in those contexts. **IJFM**

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